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## ABSTRACT

As an introduction to a 1992 symposium of educators, administrators, researchers, and legislators concerned with the education of minority students, this paper reviews the overriding issues related to diversity and American education reform in the context of Goal 3 of the National Education Goals. Framed in a context of economic uncertainty, social fragmentation, and political unrest, diversity in society worldwide has emerged as a prime focus for concern. The rapidly changing demography of the U.S. population is described. The number of language minority youth and young adults continues to grow dramatically, but their level of academic achievement lags significantly behind that of their language majority counterparts and appears to be rapidly worsening. It is suggested that although the impetus for educational reform comes at least in part from a response to the conditions created by increasing diversity, the leaders of the movement have largely failed to involve language minorities or address their concerns. Contains 20 references. (LB)

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# OVERVIEW: DIVERSITY AND EDUCATION REFORM

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This is a time of remarkable and rapid change in the world. Events in Eastern Europe and the transformation of the Soviet Union into the Confederation of Independent States are global manifestations of currents that pervade virtually every aspect of life today. In many ways, the world order, and our societies, are being "restructured." Science and technology are moving at a pace never seen before in human history. While much of the change is positive, expanding freedoms, extending the boundaries of knowledge and understanding, even redefining what is possible, it brings many new challenges. Framed in a context of economic uncertainty, social fragmentation, and political unrest, dealing with diversity in societies has emerged as a prime focus for concern.

## Diversity in the United States

One result of the turmoil stemming from political, social, and economic upheavals in countries around the world has been the movement of people. Although the United States has long been the destination for immigrants from many countries seeking freedom and economic opportunity, the last decade has witnessed a significant increase in resettlement here. These diverse groups of newcomers, along with shifts in indigenous populations and increased ease of movement and communication within our borders, are changing the face of communities throughout American society.

The 1990 U.S. Census confirmed what many people sensed: during the decade of the 1980s, the United States became an increasingly multicultural society, with members of diverse ethnic groups found in communities large and small throughout the country. During a time when the total population of the United States increased by just 10 percent:

- the number of Asian and Pacific Islanders more than doubled (from 3.5 million to 7.3 million);
- the Hispanic-origin population increased by over 50 percent, from 14.6 million to 22.4 million;
- American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut groups grew by 37 percent, from 1.4 million to nearly 2 million (National Association for Bilingual Education, 1991).

Not only did the numbers increase significantly, so did the diversity within these groups. "The nation's minority population is becoming increasingly diverse, with a range of new Asian and Hispanic subgroups growing rapidly and dispersing across the continent..." (Vobejda, 1991). For example, while numbers of the predominant Asian groups—Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese—grew substantially, the size of other Asian groups, such as Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian expanded at an even faster rate during the last decade.

The impact of diversity has reached into every corner of the country, contributing to the process of change in society as a whole. Issues of equity, access, and communication across cultural lines have come to dominate discussion in political, social, and economic arenas. Nowhere is the tension felt more acutely than in the domain of education.

## Diversity in Education: Crisis and Opportunity

The rapidly changing demography of the U.S. population has profound implications for all aspects of American education. Quite bluntly, our country faces a crisis—one of alarming proportions. The number of language minority youth and young adults continues to grow dramatically, but their level of academic

achievement lags significantly behind that of their language majority counterparts and appears to be rapidly worsening. As the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) recently noted:

Public schools have been among the first of these institutions required to respond to increased cultural diversity within our borders. Desegregation, bilingual education, ESL adult education classes, ethnographic studies, and ethnic celebrations are examples of previous public school responses to increasingly pluralistic constituencies. Further, a primary intent of the current education reform movement has been to improve the education outcomes of underachieving minority students.

However, many educators and policymakers believe that these strategies have not been sufficient. Although numerous minority children do experience outstanding academic achievement, according to Hodgkinson (1989), the current education reform movement has flunked the demographic agenda. (CCSSO, 1991, p. 1)

Actual numbers of students are hard to pin down, since definitions of "language minority" and "limited English proficient" (LEP) vary widely. However, it is clear that the number of students from non-English language backgrounds is growing.

- A report by Oxford et al. (1984) showed 2.4 million children age 5 to 14 with limited English proficiency in 1980 and projected increases to 2.8 million by 1990 and to 3.4 million in 2000.

**The number of language minority youth and young adults continues to grow dramatically, but their level of academic achievement lags significantly behind that of their language majority counterparts and appears to be rapidly worsening.**

- Olsen (1989) reported that over 1.5 million students in 1986-87 were identified as limited English proficient, but estimates that three to six times that number need specialized instruction.
- Waggoner (1991) suggests that the results of the 1990 census are likely to point to over 8 million children from families where a language other than English is used.

These national estimates are supported by current state and local figures.

- California reported that, in 1990, more than one out of six students enrolled in state schools, a total of 861,531, was limited in English

proficiency.

- Ten years earlier, only 376,794 students were identified as LEP (Lambert, 1991).

Such numbers might not be surprising for California, New York, Texas, or Florida, but substantial numbers of students from diverse language backgrounds are found in school districts everywhere.

- A recent newsletter from Minnesota reports that Minneapolis/St. Paul has 44,000 refugees (mostly Southeast Asian), and in a school district with 40,000 students total, 16 percent are Southeast Asian.
- Further, while the 3,200 LEP students in the district are primarily Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, there are 78 different languages spoken in the homes of these students.

Moreover, these dramatic increases are occurring while the overall population of school-aged children is declining. The Department of Education reported a decline from over 52 million school-aged children in 1970 to just over 47 million in 1980 to under 45 million in 1985 (cited in Vobejda, 1987). As a result, the proportion of language minority students in the schools is growing even more rapidly than the absolute numbers. If current trends continue, it is likely that the majority of the school-aged population will be from language minority backgrounds in 50 or more major American cities by the year 2000 (Tucker, 1990).

These numbers are particularly alarming in light of the fact mentioned above: academic achievement and school completion rates for many minority students are low, particularly for Hispanic students, who are the largest minority and a rapidly growing sector of our population. A recent study of Hispanic education concluded that Hispanics are the most undereducated major segment of the U.S. population—they tend to enter school later, leave school earlier, and are less likely to complete high school or participate in postsecondary education (National Council of La Raza, 1991). Cited in that report are results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which indicate that, among Hispanic eighth graders, 75 percent cannot pass a test of simple mathematical operations, including decimals and fractions.

Many language minority students, not only Hispanics, are potentially at risk. The National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) showed that, while Asian students had higher levels of achievement in reading and math than other minority groups, there were great variations among Asian subgroups. Southeast Asians were well below average, and Pacific

Islanders proved to have the greatest needs of all racial and ethnic groups studied (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992).

The threat to society caused by the failure to educate groups of students is increasingly recognized. Some see a two-class society emerging in this country. By the year 2000, approximately 60 percent of all new workers will be members of ethnic and linguistic minorities. Large segments of the workforce will be the children of young adults who are now dropping out of high school and who find vocational training programs ill suited for real job demands. The cycle of failure in education, employment, and training for minority groups, including language minorities, will have a tremendous impact on our country's ability to assemble a competent and competitive workforce in the years ahead. These fears were echoed by a series of reports issued in the late 1980s (e.g., *Workforce 2000* and *The Bottom Line: Basic Skills in the Workplace*) which assessed the state of our preparedness as a nation to enter the 21st century.

In education, the response has signaled a time for change. In critical content areas, educators have documented the current unacceptable state of affairs and offered recommendations for positive action to change it: in mathematics (*Everybody Counts*); in science (*Project 2061: Science for All Americans*); and in social studies (*Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century*). At an historic summit conducted in Charlottesville, VA in 1989, the President and the nation's governors sounded the call for national education reform and developed the National Education Goals for the year 2000. The education reform movement continues to gather strength and promises to transform the crisis in education into an opportunity to form a new and radically different system for educating all the students of the United States.

## Restructuring Education

Today multiculturalism is a fact of life in this country. To proceed with business as usual, in the face of changing demographics, would be a disservice to all public school students as well as to the future welfare of the entire nation. (CCSSO, 1991, p. 8)

Such calls for educational reform are not new. In the 1980s, research on effective schools led to prescriptions for school improvement, one result of which was the trend toward school-based management (McKeon and Malarz, 1991). However, more recently, education reformers are calling for a complete rethinking of the educational process, a "restructuring." According to the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, restructuring "represents a concern for fundamental changes in the way schools are organized, but the precise nature of those changes...is in hot dispute" (Newmann, 1991).

Today the education reform movement unites disparate groups from government, education, and the private sector. Concerns for the quality of the teaching force led to the establishment of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in 1987, a private nonprofit group whose purpose is to develop national standards for teacher certification, both core standards and specializations. That Board's work is progressing toward the planned issuance of certificates in 1993. Concerns for subject-matter knowledge have spurred efforts to set standards for what students should know and what they should be able to do in the various content areas, including mathematics (by the National Assessment Governing Board, the Mathematical Sciences Education Board, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, in sepa-

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rate efforts), science (National Science Teachers Association, American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Coordinating Council for Education), English (National Council of Teachers of English), and social studies (National Council for the Social Studies). Specific attention is also being focused on language minorities by the TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Task Force on Policy and Standards for K-12 Language Minority Students in the United States.

In 1989, the President and the governors set the six National Education Goals for the country to work toward for the year 2000. These goals address school readiness, high school graduation, content area mastery (especially science and mathematics), literacy, and the need for a drug- and violence-free school environment. Both public and private sector institutions were called upon to contribute to restructuring education to make these goals achievable.

In addition to goals and standards, various groups were formed to consider assessment issues, both national and local. The National Education Goals Panel was established in 1990 to measure the nation's progress toward achieving the goals. The National Council on Education Standards and Testing was formed in 1991 to investigate the desirability and feasibility of developing a national standards and assessment system for students.

It is clear that diverse constituencies have staked a claim on restructuring American education. The many initiatives mentioned above are only part of the total picture. However, although the impetus for

educational reform undoubtedly comes at least in part from a response to the conditions created by increasing diversity, the leaders of the movement have largely failed to involve language minorities or address their concerns. Educators of language minority students feel alienated from the reform movement and the National Education Goals. They feel left out of the discussions and powerless to affect the decisions that are being made. As a result, the debate on reform issues is not reaching an important segment of the education community, who feel that the process does not respond to their concerns. There is an urgent need to ensure the inclusion of this constituency in the debate on education reform.

Change is everywhere—in the world, in our society, in education. The significant changes that are occurring are in part responsible for the increasing diversity in our society, and that diversity is in turn leading many to call for restructuring and change in the way we deal with diversity, including in our education system.

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